

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO THE 21 AUGUST 1986 LAKE NYOS GAS DISASTER, CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT: *Religion sits alongside other factors to determine the capacity to understand, respond and recover from Disaster. Following the occurrence of the Lake Nyos disaster and as it became clear that the horrifying natural episode marked a turning point in the lives of the hardest-hit communities, religious leaders and their faithful brought a faith perspective to the explanation and response to the event. This article focuses on these religious reactions to the Nyos disaster, and draws on published research, oral sources and previously unexplored archival sources. After presenting the pre-disaster religious landscape of the area, it first investigates religious explanations to the origins and impact of the event. Second, it explores ritual practices that were observed in response to the disaster. Finally, it highlights how the disaster was used as a justification for Christian social action and proselytization among survivors. In the conclusion, I make the case that the religious faiths in the Lake Nyos disaster area explained and responded to the event in ways that were couched in religious terms.*

KEYWORDS: Disaster, Lake Nyos, Religion, Christianity, Islam, Indigenous Religion, Theodicy, Ritual, Social Action, Proselytisation.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, the globe has witnessed extreme natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes and hurricanes, avalanches and landslides and bushfires (Balgah, 2012: 087). It is revealed in existing literature that these disasters result in both economic and socio-psychological repercussions, with exceedingly higher implications on poorer victims in developing countries (Balgah et al, 2012: 1344). The Lake Nyos Disaster (LND) of 21 August 1986 in the then Menchum Division of the North West Province of Cameroon altered the entire fabric of the hardest-hit communities (Chah, Nyos and Su-Bum) that existed prior to the incident and caused traumatic stress among the poor survivors (Zhang and Kling, 2006: 4). Indeed the poisonous carbon dioxide and hydrogen sulphide that unexpectedly accumulated and escaped from the crater lake killed over 1,700 people and displaced more than 10,000 survivors. While scientists were at work to determine the cause of the disaster, international and national relief workers converged in the area for short and long-term relief work. As this was ongoing, practitioners of the Christian and Indigenous religious traditions tried to explain the disaster in religious terms upon which their involvement in relief operations hinged.

Interestingly, the intersections between religion and disaster relief has caught the attention of academics in the past decades. Chester et al (2008) launch the debate with the observation that religious traditions see humanity as inextricably linked to nature. It is in this context that the persistent link between religion and disasters should be understood. The theodicy concept, as Chester notes, is used to reconcile the concept of a loving God, who treats his creatures with justice, and the simultaneous existence of evil and suffering (Chester, 1998). In most

religious traditions, discussions of theodicy focus not only on suffering caused by humans to humans, but also on natural evils especially disasters following in the wake of extreme natural events. Within the Christian faith, there is a long history of theological reflection on the relationships between God, natural processes and human suffering. This has served as a basis for the interpretation of disasters as God's punishment attracted by man's sinfulness. Religious leaders interpreted the occurrence of the Nyos disaster in the light of their faith traditions. Regarding the Indigenous religion of the people, ritual priests attributed the disaster to spirits and ancestors angered by violations of tradition and cosmic order. This had a bearing on the manner in which they responded to the natural shock. But Christian leaders in Cameroon did not interpret the LND as punishment of human sinfulness by an often wrathful God. They did not see the occurrence of the disaster as a manifestation of divine power sent to punish the sinfulness of the Chah, the Nyos and the Su-Bum. Rather, Christian leaders understood the disaster in the light of the liberationist approach to theodicy. The latter does not consider natural disasters as God's wrath attracted by the sinfulness of the affected people. It locates the presence of the divine in disaster victims and is not perceived as being within the geological processes that cause disasters. This new perspective, it should be noted, was already deep-rooted within Cameroonian Christianity when the Nyos disaster occurred in 1986. So, it significantly informed Christian attitudes toward relief responses.

The National Disaster Interfaith Network which is based in New York, USA notes that integral to all phases of the disaster lifecycle are the support and services provided by churches. In the case of the Nyos disaster as will be understood later, emergency relief services and long-term rehabilitation operations were also the works of Christian churches collaborating as interfaith or faith-based networks. Interestingly enough, existing scholarship reveal that contemporary humanitarian action has clear roots in religious traditions. On the overall, the concept of theodicy as applied by Christian and Indigenous religious leaders will underpin analysis on the religious reactions to the LND. Interviews with some of the relatives and survivors from this disaster who were/are practitioners of these religions have been drawn on in this paper, as well as archival material arising out of the incident's management.

The Pre-Disaster Religious Landscape

The region that was hit by the 21 August 1986 Lake Nyos Eruption is located in Menchum Division in the North West Region of Cameroon. The area has a diversity of ecosystems, ranging from extensive mountain areas, savannah and dry land areas, to low lands, coastal plains and patches of tropical forests. The area comprised three Tikar chiefdoms: Chah, Nyos and Su-Bum (Chilver and Kaberry, 1967). It was a multi-religious society prior to the occurrence of the natural shock. The highly religious nature of these people resulted in an unending entanglement between religion and disasters throughout the region, as elsewhere in the world. Indeed, the area was host to three religious traditions, namely, Indigenous Religion, Christianity and Islam.

The peopling of the area by the Chah, the Nyos and the Su-Bum placed the region on the path to becoming religiously diverse. As the various people migrated into the area and sedentarised thanks to their adoption of an agricultural culture, their indigenous religions took shape. These indigenous religions which were inbuilt in their culture resulted from the intellectual acumen and creative endeavours of the indigenous people. As an associated element of culture, indigenous religious beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed evidences the people's creative capabilities in view of responding to their daily life including disasters. As the people interacted with each other over time and circumstances, their

indigenous religions intertwined, spread and absorbed new ingredients. Consequently, these traditional religions that survived until the occurrence of the LND and up to today, though differing from each other, have always contained similar insights, such as has been expressed in belief in the Supreme Being, ritual practices and sacrifices (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982: 195-199). They are not limited to these practices, but affect all aspects of life, from farming to hunting, from travel to natural shocks. The people believed that the Supreme Being manifested in all life and nature and provided solutions to a myriad of problems (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982: 195-199). As a matter of fact, the role of Indigenous Religion as a mechanism for explaining and responding to disasters is irrefutable. When the LND disaster occurred, these Indigenous Religious practices were still observed by its practitioners. In fact, Lake Nyos constituted one of the sacred sites of the Nyos where propitiatory rituals were performed annually. No wonder the followers of the Nyos Indigenous Religion attributed the natural shock to the wrath of ancestral spirits.

Of course, the introduction of faith traditions other than Indigenous Religion significantly diversified the religious landscape of the area. The imposition of Islam in the northern region of Cameroon in the first half of the nineteenth century through an Islamic revolution that was linked to Uthman Dan Fodio's Jihad (Njeuma, 1978) marked the beginning of the gradual entrance of Muslims into the Nyos area. As Islam was gradually coming to the region, Western Christian missions (especially the Basel Mission, Sacred Heart Fathers, Mill Hill Mission and the American Baptist Mission) began planting Catholicism and Protestantism in the area (Lang, 2005: 18). This became a basis for the broadening of the religious landscape given that many practitioners of Indigenous Religion converted to Christianity. The Catholic and Protestant churches that accrued from the ecclesiastical mould of these missions also address natural disasters and many other misfortunes in the light of the Christian religion. At the time of the LND, the Catholic Mission, Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) were the mainstream churches that were involved in mission work in the area. Taken as a whole, the Nyos disaster zone encompassed people who belonged to different religious traditions: Indigenous Religion, Islam and the Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity. Considering that all religious traditions see humanity as inextricably linked to nature, the LND was given a religious component that held God and the affected people responsible, necessitating an aura of religious responses that were inbuilt in the post-disaster management operations. This brief discussion sets the context for much of the remaining portion of the paper, where we shall discuss the religious reactions to the disaster.

Religious Explanations of the Nyos Disaster

The Nyos disaster devastated three communities in ways that perturbed the religious life of the people. In the three villages, as it was reported in a Requiem Mass for the dead victims at the Saint Joseph Metropolitan Cathedral in Bamenda, the Christian community died along with the rest of the victims. The Catholic Catechists in Nyos and Su-Bum died in the disaster. The PCC lost Rev. Peter Igang Igang and Evangelist Moses Kudi Mvo along with hundreds of its members (Cheng, oral information). Besides, the disaster displaced about 6,675 Presbyterians. The Muslim faithful in the area was also heavily affected in terms of deaths and displacements. And following the decision to evacuate the survivors from the disaster zone due to the potential for the reoccurrence of the disaster, mosques, churches and ritual sites in Chah, Nyos and Su-Bum were abandoned. On the overall, the disaster perturbed the people's belief or value system that provided them strength, hope and meaning to life. As a

matter of fact, the externals of their belief system-places of worship, traditions and rites-were significantly altered.

It was this injurious nature of the disaster that caused the need among religious leaders to attempt to provide religious explanations to the natural shock. These religious explanations hinged on the relationships between God, natural processes and human suffering. Religious leaders interpreted the occurrence of the disaster in the light of their faith traditions in ways that held God and the victims as scapegoats. The suffering to which the Christian faithful was subjected was interpreted by Catholic and Protestant leaders as the wrath of God and a call to repentance. In a meeting of the Protestant Nyos Relief Action Committee (PNRAC) on 12 January 1987, Pastor Johnson Ndi of the CBC in the opening prayer referred to the suffering of the disaster victims as a great honour and evidence that Christ counted them worthy to witness for Him through suffering (Minutes of Protestant Nyos Relief Action Committee, 1987). The clergyman went on to note that the survivors should not forget what Christ Himself had gone through for their salvation and that to suffer for His name's sake was a gift rather than a cross. For the Protestant clergymen, therefore, the suffering caused by the LND was a learning experience and a process of soul-making.

Although the Archbishop of the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province, Paul Verdzekov, was seemingly reluctant just like his Protestant counterparts to invoke divine responsibility, he however drew a direct link between the cruel suffering and death of Jesus and the suffering of the victims of the Nyos disaster in a homily he delivered in the Mankon Cathedral on 22 September 1986 (Cameroon Panorama, 1986). This divine suffering laid bare by the Christian clergy has scriptural underpinnings as observed in the first Epistle of Peter (1 Peter 4: 12-19) where suffering in the example of the one caused by the Nyos disaster occurs to prove the reality of faith, to share Christ's suffering and to glorify God. What perhaps emerges from this Christian explanation is that if suffering caused by natural shocks represents spiritual discipline as well as a learning experience, then God's will was expressed in the Nyos cataclysmic disaster. Interestingly, as George H. Smith (1989: 76) observes, there is a biblical portrayal of God as a being of terrific character-cruel, vindictive and capricious. In the book of Isaiah 45: 6-7, for instance, the biblical God reports, "I am the Lord, and there is no other.... I form the light and create darkness; I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things." Passages of this nature abound in the Old and New Testaments. No wonder Christians interpreted the disaster as sharing in Christ's suffering and as a call to intercessory prayer for victims and for Christian social action. As we shall discuss later, the Christian clergy used ecumenical relief aid as a means of assisting the process of conversion.

While unconsciously opposing purely naturalistic geological explanations submitted by scientists, Chief Priests of Indigenous Religion in Su-Bum, Nyos, Chah and some neighbouring fondoms saw the hand of the Supreme Being in the murderous disaster. They were unanimous in ascribing the human and material losses of the event to divine wrath caused, perhaps, by a breach of the people's relationship with supernatural spirits. In commenting on the disaster, Peter Mbuuh Nengih, a committed practitioner of Indigenous Religion, established a link between the violations of traditions and cosmic order by the affected populations and the disaster (Nengih, oral information). The numerous ritualistic actions that were performed by ritual priests in the hope of appeasing divine wrath, following the disaster, accords credibility to my argument that God was held responsible for the Nyos disaster.

It is important to observe that the above religious explanations for the Nyos disaster somehow reduced the human responsibility for the disaster by giving it a divine perspective. The human failure to foresee and preempt the disaster was completely absent in religious explanations. After the Lake Monoun Eruption of 1984, government institutions charged with preempting disasters were supposed to scientifically study lakes in Cameroon in view of understanding what was going wrong. This was not done. In 1986 Lake Nyos erupted in a similar manner, killing over 1,700 people. Man's responsibility in this event, I believe, lies in his failure to know that poisonous gases had piled up beneath the lake creating the potential for a disaster that could have been preempted. Good enough, the foregoing religious explanations which served as a basis for varied forms of ritual observances were knocked down and eclipsed by scientists. In its final report, following academic exchanges and field research, the United States Scientific Team submitted, in part, that an undetermined mechanism triggered a catastrophic release of carbon dioxide from the lake, which created a lethal cloud that flowed downhill into populated areas (Tuttle et al, Final report on Nyos Disaster, 1987). There was therefore a cold competition between scientific and retributive religious explanations of the disaster and its impact on the population. But it is important to stress that in spite of scientists' submission that the disaster had its roots in a geological process, religious explanations were at the time (as may still be the case) both deep-seated and of long-standing within the hardest-hit communities. This explains why the post-disaster rituals that were observed by various religious faiths were underpinned by the manner in which they interpreted the occurrence of the murderous event. I will argue in the next sections that responses to the disaster by faith traditions were couched in religious terms.

Spontaneous Expression of Grief and Intercessory Prayer

In studying post-disaster rituals and symbols in Britain, Anne Eyre has pointed out that rituals that are performed after a disaster occurs have significant implications for disaster management in the domains of managing sensitively and appropriately the range of psychological, social and political issues associated with immediate and long-term relief operations (Eyre, 1999: 23). Following the Nyos disaster, funeral rituals were observed by religious faithful in the form of grief and prayer. Such rituals can be therapeutic in helping afflicted communities come to terms with the tragedy of death. Followers of Indigenous Religion performed ritualistic actions in the hope of properly burying the dead and appeasing divine wrath. During the observance of burial rituals, ritual priests invoked ancestors and other supernatural spirits to ease the transition of the dead to the world beyond (Nengih, oral information). The ritualistic appeasement of divine wrath was necessitated by the belief that the tragic death caused by the disaster was a source of pollution in the society. As I have argued elsewhere, most cultures believe that the purity of a society can be tainted or rendered impure (polluted) by various forces including tragic death. This explains why indigenous ritual priests were involved in view of restoring the purity that was tainted by the Nyos disaster. The people who saw or touched the corpses were regarded by ritual priests as polluted from contact with the dead. As reported during field trip by some ardent practitioners of Indigenous Religion, the death rituals that were observed when the Nyos disaster occurred helped in the purification of the society in general and the mourners (survivors) specifically (Ipalim Elders, Group Oral Information). The rituals were therefore intended to win the favour of the Supreme Being and ancestral spirits as regards the restoration of purity. In the fiefdom of Bum which was also affected by the disaster, ritual priests conducted rituals, organized ceremonies and offered sacrifices and prayers.

Concerning the Christian and Muslim faith traditions, initial funeral rituals started with individual prayers offered by followers of these faiths after hearing news of the disaster. Some practitioners of these faiths even visited the disaster site and assisted in the emergency burial of the death. The crosses that were planted in some graves were indicative of the religiosity of the response to the event. They were planted on the graves of some of the committed Christians and clergymen whose bodies were identified and commended to the mercy of God by the Catholic and Protestant clergy who were among the first people to arrive in the hardest-hit communities. Some Muslims who survived the disaster also took some measures to commend the deceased to the mercy of Allah.

In Christian places of worship, church services were held in order to collectively commend the dead to God's mercy. The church services were also intended to help survivors find meaning in the disaster. Indeed providing opportunities for and leading prayer, worship and ritual rites served as an essential foundation for survivors' recovery. On 14 September 1986 on the occasion of an ecumenical Catholic-Protestant service in memory of the victims of the LND, Father Felix Muscat noted in his homily that it was right and fitting that they gathered together to pray for the victims and to show their solidarity with the millions of people all over the world who sent relief aid to the survivors. In concluding the homily, Father Muscat called on the Christian faithful to pray for the bereaved survivors from Nyos, Chah and Subum (Cameroon Panorama, 1986: 7-9). Earlier on 30 August on the occasion of the National Mourning that was decreed by the President of Cameroon, a hugely attended church service was held at the Cathedral in Yaounde. During the service, Mgr. Donato Squircciarini, Apostolate Pro-Nuncio of Cameroon, observed that the purpose of the service was to enable Catholics to participate in the sorrow of the survivors of the Nyos disaster. Here is an excerpt of his homily:

Today, we are here in the Cathedral of Yaounde to give a spiritual dimension to our gesture of solidarity; we are here to pray above all for our brothers who have preceded us in fulfilling the final stage common to all mankind (Cameroon Panorama, 1986: 6).

The message of the Holy Father John Paul II was read during this service. The Pope recommended to the mercy of God all the victims and expressed his profound sympathy to the survivors, imploring for them the hope and courage which comes from God (Cameroon Panorama, 1986). The Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda expressed in a circular letter their sentiments of profound solidarity with the bereaved families and offered up their humble intercession to God for all those who died in the murderous event. The circular instructed every Parish to see into it that at least one Holy Mass should be offered for all those killed in the disaster. It also exhorted all Catholic faithful in the region to put the needs of all the survivors in their prayers, and to offer Holy Masses for that intension. On the overall, this convergence in Catholic worship places reflected the depth of the grief following the disaster.

There was also attendance at Protestant worship places. Immediately following the disaster, PCC and CBC worship places around Menchum Division were opened for individual prayers and special services. In a circular letter to the families of the PCC clergy who died in the disaster as well as to the members of the PCC, the Presbytery Secretary of Menchum-Boyo Presbytery, Rev. Elias Cheng, wrote as follows:

The Saints of Su-Bum and Nyos congregations who were called to their eternal homes on that fateful night of Thursday the 21st of August, 1986, are resting in the peace and love of Him who is the resurrection and the life. It is great religion to belief in God and belief in Christ. These words from the heart of Jesus reach our hearts as we pray for our departed brethren in Christ (Cheng's Circular Letter, 27 August 1986).

The Protestant clergy acted as a useful resource in identifying victims and providing counseling. This is a pointer to the fact that the presence of the divine was located in both disaster victims. This was the main event during the formal memorial services that were held in Protestant worship places on the National Mourning decreed by the president. These memorial services, just like those held in Catholic cathedrals and congregations, provided an opportunity for those affected by the disaster to share their grief with others. Indeed interviews with relatives and survivors highlight the importance of such events in aiding recovery from the disaster. One survivor comments thus on how he felt after attending two of such formal memorial services:

The crowd pulling memorial services was evidence that those affected by the disaster were not abandoned to themselves. I was very much amazed by the presence of important personalities especially the Senior Divisional Officer for Menchum, Fai Yengo Francis and the Municipal Administration of the Wum Rural Council, Abraham Dinga Abang. This marked the real beginning of my recovery from the disaster (Mbongshe, oral information).

After a year had passed, Christian churches celebrated the first anniversary of the Nyos disaster. This is because anniversaries have the potential of facilitating the psychological and social recovery of disaster-affected. Eyre (1999) adds that anniversaries amount to collective remembrance and expression of a community memory. On the first anniversary of the Nyos disaster, a Catholic-Protestant ecumenical commemoration services were organized in Wum, Bafmen, Weh, and in other parts of Cameroon. The one in Wum which was led by five ministers from three churches was attended by hundreds of people. This first anniversary renewed bereavement and grief as relatives and survivors reunited. In the build up to this anniversary, officials of the Catholic and Protestant churches organized separate prayer sessions in the relief camps (Minutes of Protestant Nyos Relief Action Committee, 27 August 1987). Since the occurrence of the disaster, the anniversary and its commemorative church services have remained an annual event couched in religious terms. In 2011, the 25th anniversary of the disaster commemorated in churches across Menchum and Boyo Divisions where the survivors were resettled. The clergymen and the survivors used this 25th anniversary to highlight the numerous problems that were still faced by the people affected by the disaster. They asked for God's intervention in solving the difficulties in which the survivors were trapped in the resettlement camps.

The foregoing ritual response of the Catholic and Protestant clerical corps finds support in scripture and in the history of Christian reactions to disasters. As Chester observes, there are many examples of intercessory prayer for victims of disasters traced to New Testament times when severe famine occurred in Palestine. It is reported in Acts 11: 28-30 that following the disaster, the apostles offered intercessory for fellow Christians living in Judea. This tradition of responding to disasters (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, landslides, floods, etc.) through intercessory prayers has continued throughout the history of Christianity. What

happened following the Nyos disaster was only the observance of an age-old Christian praxis of seeing the suffering of Christ in the distress of disaster victims. The prayer and worship services that were organized following the Nyos disaster were intended to serve this purpose. The ritual services helped the affected communities to find meaning in the murderous event and to recover from it.

The Nyos Disaster as a Call for Christian Social Action

The tradition of Christian social action among people affected by disasters is an old practice within the history of Christianity with scriptural roots. In New Testament times as it is reported in Acts 11: 28-30, apostles sent relief aid to Christians in Judea when the town was hit by famine. Since then, Christian social action has evolved to become a feature of religious reactions to many historic and contemporary disasters resulting from natural processes. The Lake Nyos Disaster was no exception as it was interpreted by Christians as a call for social action. Christian churches (Roman Catholic, Baptist Missions and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon) did a commendable job in responding to the health needs of the survivors. Catholic hospitals in Njinikom and Shishong were very active in the medical care for the survivors. The Director of the Njinikom mission hospital, Dr. Dawson, made frequent visits to relief camps where he identified and evacuated patients to the hospital (Horn, Report on Nyos Disaster, 8 October 1986). In addition, a medical team from Catholic Mission Hospital Fontem visited the places that hosted the survivors and provided medical care. The renowned Baptist hospital in Mbingo also received many patients while the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon provided medical supplies to the patients in the General Hospitals in Wum and Nkambe (Lang, 2013: 15).

Given that the potential for the re-occurrence of the disaster was high as submitted by American scientists (Tuttle et al, 1987), survivors were provided temporal accommodation in makeshift relief camps where their emergency needs had to be catered for (Balgah and Buchenrieder, 2014: 235). The Catholic Mission set up temporal resettlement relief centres in its premises in Wum, Bafmen and Kumfutu. There were other camps run by government in Wum, Esu and Kimbi. In these camps, the churches joined other aid agencies in providing the emergency supplies needed by the displaced survivors. The supplies comprised tents, blankets, beds, food supplies, educational needs, toiletries, clothing, and many other emergency needs. It is important to mention that the government resolved to use these churches in making sure that the international aid that reached Wum was received by the intended beneficiaries. Thus, the churches made their personnel and resources available for the relief response in the camps.

In order to ensure that the children displaced by the disaster pursued their education, the churches made books and uniforms available. Under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Education Authority, the Catholic authorities resolved to pay the fees of all affected children that were schooling in Catholic primary schools. In Kumfutu and Esu, due to an increase in the number of disaster-orphaned children attending schools, the Catholic Mission sponsored the construction of six additional classrooms in its primary school that was adjacent to the relief camp (Balgah and Buchenrieder, 2014: 235). Before the final resettlement of the survivors in 1989, the orphaned children had received an education which perhaps placed them on a new career development path.

The PCC and CBC also offered emergency supplies to the affected people in the various camps. During the first week of the disaster, the Naikom Congregation in Wum donated an

aura of foodstuffs to survivors in the two camps in the town. The supplies increased when the church dispatched Revs. D. S. Gana and Achowah Omenei to Wum with two trucks loaded with food, clothing and kitchen tools. At the beginning of the second week, representatives of the Mezam Presbytery Christian Women Fellowship visited the Esu Camp with food and clothing (Cheng, Report on..., 1987). After holding an emergency meeting on the Nyos disaster, the Synod Committee of the PCC released the sum of CFA 1,500,000 francs to boost emergency supplies. It was against this backdrop that the Moderator, Rt. Rev. Henry Awasom, toured the camps distributing supplies to the displaced people. While in the Kimbi Camp, the Moderator was joined by twelve pastors from Bafut-Tubah Presbytery led by the Presbytery Secretary, Rev. Chebe Edison; they had similar supplies (Cheng, Report on..., 1987). Some relief aid was provided by the ecumenical partners of the PCC, namely, Bread for the World, the Basel Mission and the Goppingen Deanery. In January 1987, for instance, the Goppingen Deanery that was in partnership with the Menchum-Boyo Presbytery dispatched a team of three persons to Cameroon with relief aid which was allocated to the relief centres (Minutes of Protestant Nyos Relief Action Committee, June 1987).

While in the camps, measures were still taken by church officials to address the health needs of the displaced people. In the two tent-camps at Kimbi, Doctor Dawson of the Catholic Mission was very active in the medical care for the refugees. Through a health programme, Doctor Dawson was able to educate the survivors on how to prevent the outbreak of an epidemic in the camps, dug latrines, promoted the cultivation of vegetables, and battled against scabies which had attacked most of the displaced people in Kimbi and Bafmen (Dawson, Report on Medical Relief Services in Disaster Camps, July 1987). Those who had severe health problems in the camps in Wum received medical care at the Catholic Health Centre in Wum where Sister Bridget was commissioned to handle such cases. In addition, medical doctors from the Mbingo Baptist Hospital made occasional visits to the Kumfutu and Bafmen camps where they offered medical care to orphaned children.

The churches were also heavily involved in the rehabilitation of survivors in the permanent resettlement sites that were chosen by government. They helped in providing critical needs such as schools, pipe borne water, primary health posts, residential homes, among others in resettlement sites in Esu, Ukpwah, Yemnggeh, Kimbi, Kumfutu, Bua-Bua, and Ipalim (Muscat, Report of the Resettlement..., 1989). Generally, the Catholic, Baptist and Presbyterian churches shared the grief and stress of the survivors of the Nyos disaster by providing them emergency supplies in the camps. This Christian manifestation of charity in the event of such a cataclysmic episode was certainly justified by the commandment to love one's neighbor and by seeing the suffering of Christ in the distress of the people displaced by the disaster. But as the next section will argue, the Nyos disaster was probably seen as a "good disaster" given that it was used by religious leaders (especially Christian ones) as a means of assisting the process of conversion.

Using the Disaster as a Means of Assisting the Process of Conversion

After building on the theological concept of theodicy to explain the occurrence and meaning of the Nyos disaster, the distress of the affected population was interpreted as an opportunity to draw them closer to God. For Christian religious leaders, the disaster was perhaps God's plan for having worthy people who will populate 'the kingdom of heaven'. Little wonder the responsibility for the disaster was placed on the shoulders of God whose wrath had been attracted by the sins of the affected people. Perhaps, it was from such an arguable standpoint

that Christian leaders involved in relief operations in ways that amounted to conversion to the Christian faith. Indeed Catholic and Protestant churches fashioned a strategy that was intended to evangelize and proselytize among the survivors who were in vulnerable need. They stationed catechists and evangelists in the various makeshift relief camps with the claim of providing spiritual care to their members. The PCC and CBC undertook what they referred to as “emergency census” of their displaced members in response to a similar exercise which had been carried out by the Catholic authorities. From every indication and as evident in reports, the leaders of the Catholic and Protestant churches suspected each other of proselytization and took measures to protect their faithful. In his report to the Moderator of the PCC, Rev. Cheng expressed the need for Protestant churches to be sensitive against what he termed “Roman Catholic policy of converting Protestants who were disaster victims” (Cheng, Report on Nyos Disaster, 1987). This was particularly the case in Wum, Kumfutu and Bafmen where the Catholic Mission had set up relief camps in its premises.

It was therefore within the context of such proselytization accusations that Protestant pastors and evangelists were advised to carry out Christian instruction in the relief camps. The Moderator of the PCC called on pastors to equally baptize and administer Holy Communion to confessing survivors. In addition, the Executive Committee of the Menchum-Boyo Presbytery received instructions to constantly visit the camps for spiritual needs and evangelization (Cheng, Report on Nyos Disaster, 1987). As time went on, temporal houses for evangelists were established at the camps to ensure effective presence. In the Kumfutu Camp which located in the Catholic premises, the PCC stepped up evangelization by organizing a youth camp intended to spread the word of God and to build a worshiping house for the survivors in the community. The event which took place in February 1987 pulled together young Presbyterians from all nooks and crannies of Menchum-Boyo Presbytery. Its immediate outcome was the construction of an emergency church house for the displaced Presbyterians (Mofor, Report on..., March 1987). At the Kimbi relief camp, a similar church house was expediently constructed to aid the process of evangelization. The CBC sent its theological college students to evangelize in the camps during occasional tours. Helicopters provided by Helimission were used in transporting these student pastors to the camps. Using its ecumenical channels, the CBC obtained bibles from the Yaounde-based Bible Society for distribution to survivors. Just like the PCC, the Baptists eventually stationed full-time pastors, evangelists and chaplains to work among survivors in relief camps (Cheng, Report on Nyos Disaster, 1987).

After noticing Protestant commitment towards evangelization, the Catholics resolved to station catechists in relief camps that were not based in its premises as was the case in Kimbi, Esu and Wum. The catechists in Kimbi were supervised by the Rector of the Saint Gabriel’s Parish, Bafmen Father James Nielen while those in Wum, Kumfutu and Esu were under the coordination of Father Ten Horn (Minutes of Meeting on Resettlement of Survivors, December 1987). And following the resettlement of the survivors in permanent sites, the Catholic Mission began constructing church houses in such places (Muscat, Report of the Resettlement..., 1989). This pushed the Protestants to adopt measures to construct church houses and houses for pastors in the resettlement sites. In one of the permanent resettlement sites at Kimbi, the PCC constructed a church house. In addition to this, the PCC used funds allotted by its ecumenical to construct a church house at the Bua-Bua site. In order to permit Muslims to continue practicing their faith, the committee that was charged with the permanent resettlement of the survivors constructed mosques in the Esu and Kimbi I camps that were reserved for the Fulani. But in the Ukpwah camp which was/is also the preserve of

the Fulani, the survivors intimated that the government undermined their Muslim faith by not constructing a mosque. Consequently, these survivors in collaboration with Non Governmental Organisations such as Plan Cameroon and Helvetas constructed the lone mosque in the camp. On their part, followers of Indigenous Religion who were the principal targets of Catholic and Protestant proselytisation practices made efforts to revive their religious observances at the resettlement sites. This explains why there was the ritual transfer of religious sites where proprietary rituals that were essential to both spiritual and community wellbeing and survival were observed. On the overall, mosques, church houses and shrines were constructed in the various resettlement sites because they serve as social resources that are tangible evidence of group identity and the necessity to reconstruct devastated communities. These religious infrastructures are still serving the religious needs of the displaced survivors.

While the use of the disaster by Christian leaders as a means of assisting the process of conversion may be applauded, their involvement in a proselytisation race among people traumatized by such a cataclysmic disaster should be criticized. Disaster scholars are in agreement that humanitarian workers including churches must respect conduct protocols when working with a traumatized community (Cutter, 2003). In a review of Ian Davis and Michael Wall's *Christian Perspectives on Disaster Management*, Hugo Slim attacks the use of relief aid as a means of aiding conversion to Christianity, because it can make the disaster to be seen as a good one (Slim, 1994: 194). Tom LeBeau (2011) accords credibility to Slim's observation when he writes that Christian relief workers ought to "meet, accept and respect disaster-affected people exactly as they are." LeBeau cautions Christian relief workers not to evangelize, proselytize or exploit persons dragged into vulnerability by disaster. In light of this, it is evident that Catholic and Protestant relief workers failed to respect the ethics of working with a distressed community through their involvement in proselytization.

CONCLUSION

On the eve of the Lake Nyos disaster, Christianity, Islam and Indigenous Religion were the faith traditions working among the population in the area. This served as a foundation for an aura of religious explanations and responses to the murderous event. The findings show that following the occurrence of the disaster, religious leaders and their faithful attempted to explain the event in religious terms. Some Christian leaders tacitly interpreted the disaster as God's judgment on the sins of the affected people, or at the very least a call to draw nearer to God. Similarly, ritual priests of Indigenous Religion attributed the disaster to supernatural spirits angered by violations of tradition and cosmic order. Of course, this holding of God and the victims responsible for the disaster was refuted by scientists who argued that it was the product of the unfolding of a geological process. But we found that these religious explanations were deep-seated, amounting to relief and rehabilitation responses that were couched in religious terms. Expectedly, as the research further shows, the adoption of such a theodicy especially by Christian leaders dragged them into the transgression of the ethics of working with a people traumatized by disaster. This is evident in the proselytisation race that was staged by Catholics and Protestants. I interpret this unethical practice as the exploitation of persons in vulnerable need. In the light of the above evidence, this paper submits that the religious faiths in the Lake Nyos disaster area explained and responded to the event in ways that were couched in religious terms. On the overall, the religious perspective that was given to the Nyos disaster examined in this paper adds more flesh to the argument that religion sits

alongside other factors to determine the capacity to understand, respond and recover from Disaster. In this regard, the paper suggests that responders to disasters should consider the religious perspective in their actions immediately following a disaster as well as long-term recovery and mitigation initiatives.

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